



Portrait of the artist as an MBA prof

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The day Nancy Adler arrived in Montreal three decades ago to teach management at McGill University is still vividly etched in her mind. Perhaps it's because she is also an artist.

Now considered a pioneer in integrating artistic approaches into management education, the celebrated professor, researcher and author teaches the three-day Global Leadership: Redefining Success course at the outset of new MBA students' year. She holds similar seminars for executives at corporations around the world.

"I came to Montreal for the first time in April, and it snowed," Dr. Adler recalls in an interview from her Montreal home. "Here I was, a native Californian, and I had to borrow a coat and hat when I came here.

"But when I came to McGill in 1980, in some ways, it was part of the beginning of my story. The whole question that was and stayed my focus is, 'What happens when you bring people from different parts of the world together?' At that time, there wasn't a single one of the top major U.S. universities interested in global management from a people perspective or cross-cultural interaction perspective."

When recruited by McGill, Dr. Adler had completed her bachelor of arts degree in economics and was finishing her doctoral program in management at UCLA. About 20 years ago, she took up painting, specializing in watercolours.

Successful and influential business leaders and artists aren't so different, she says.

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"Both have the courage to see reality the way it is rather than pretending it is something it's not, rather than just agreeing with someone else. Warren Buffett is great at that. He says, 'Let's look at the fundamentals here.' Both great artists and great leaders also have the courage to see possibility even when others don't."

She now encourages students in her global leadership seminars to take a broader, enlightened approach to what is traditionally perceived as the dog-eat-dog world of business.

As to the question of whether great leaders are born or created, Dr. Adler says in her published 2008 paper, "I am My Mother's Daughter: Early Childhood Influences on Leadership Success", that "one of the most powerful early influences on future leadership success is embedded in the personal stories and behaviour of those we love."

Dr. Adler, the middle of three children, writes that she draws courage and inspiration from her Austrian mother, Liselotte, whose Jewish family and friends were devastated by the Holocaust. At age 19, when she met her future husband, Robert Adler, an American 11 years her senior, Liselotte was convinced the world wasn't a safe place to raise children, but the couple agreed that creating a "bubble of love" would help protect their children.

"My mother eventually found a way to tell me her story in a manner that now defines the very essence of who I am as a human being, a professional, and a leader," writes Dr. Adler. "Rather than overwhelming me with horror, fear, anguish and condemnation, she told the story of her childhood in a way that encircled me with courage, compassion, responsibility and love."

Years later, she told a group of civil-sector workers leaders that "your job is to create the global equivalent of my parents' bubble of love; your job is to encircle the world with a sustainable bubble of peace, justice, compassion, and prosperity ... both today and for all the generations to come."

It was during one of her many stints as artist-in-residence at Alberta's The Banff Centre that Dr. Adler created the idea for her Global Leadership course, which encourages students to appreciate beauty and think beyond creating financial wealth. But she makes it clear that she's not suggesting the bottom line doesn't matter. "If your business isn't financially stable and have a healthy bottom line, it's not interesting, it's not beautiful. I do not take the bottom line out of this – it's necessary but no longer sufficient."

A huge component of Dr. Adler's seminars through McGill's Desautels Faculty of Management is to encourage reflection on a daily basis, "to return to the quiet and contemplation it takes to be wise," she notes in her publication and classroom tool, *The Leadership Insight Journal*.

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Nancy Adler
Leadership Insight journal
(Routledge, 2010)

Featuring 27 of her colourful nature-inspired paintings, the 184-page journal includes pages for students to log their thoughts and feelings, and answer questions

such as “Which leaders do you admire? Who inspires you?” and “What do you most want to do this year to make the world a better place?”

It’s also filled with words of wisdom and insight from global leaders including Berkshire Hathaway CEO Buffet (“I am not a businessman, I am an artist”) and Buckminster Fuller, an architect, designer and futurist (“When I am working on a problem, I never think about beauty. I think of only how to solve the problem. But when I have finished, if the solution is not beautiful, I know it is wrong.”)

Dr. Adler says she’s constantly amazed by what her students draw from her teachings.

“The arts are brilliant at inspiration and helping build the understanding that if you want people to be committed to your organization, they have to be getting something from it other than just the paycheck at the end of the week.”

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